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## DESIGNING AMONG THE NAVAJO: ETHNOAESTHETICS IN WEAVING

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*This paper is dedicated to Kate Peck Kent (1914-1987) in honor of her superb textile work in several parts of the world, especially the American Southwest.*

### INTRODUCTION

Navajo weaving from northeastern Arizona and contiguous areas of the American Southwest is widely recognized for colors and patterns that range from subtle shades to dynamic brilliance, from soft stripes to bold geometrics to fanciful pictorials. The apparent diversity in this native textile art, developed over the past three centuries, has defied any unified description of The Navajo Style. While Navajo blankets and rugs may be superficially categorized and classified, put into chronological sequences and evolutionary schemes, when the textiles are viewed synoptically, the delineation of Navajo aesthetics remains a formidable task.

The search for a Navajo style and sense of aesthetics has focused principally upon the finished products, on blankets and rugs in private and museum collections. In contrast, the ethnoaesthetics of weaving--that is, how Navajo textiles are conceived, created and judged by native craftspeople *themselves*--has received little systematic ethnographic investigation to date. Evelyn Payne Hatcher (1974) concentrated on the aspects of Navajo art related to the formal characteristics of line, color, layout, perspective and so forth. George Mills (1959) draws from other fieldworkers' assessments of Navajo values, and relates their art forms to psychological and generalized cultural traits. Gary Witherspoon (1977, 1987) has argued that Navajo woven patterns derive from and reflect the Navajo ethos at a deep structural level and, further, that specific motifs directly symbolize elements of the native religious repertoire. Evidence for his case derives from an external analysis of the Navajo belief system and an interpretive survey of published textile designs. In contrast, Kate Peck Kent (1985), following Gladys Reichard (1934, 1936), has hypothesized that Navajo weavers' own aesthetic judgements are based upon technical skills as much as on visual designs or inherent symbolism. Reichard spent considerable time in the field during the early 1930s; Kent pursued her investigation through an analysis of the patterns found in museum textile collections. Both vigorously deny any symbolic meaning attributed to Navajo textiles.

In this paper, I would like to discuss an approach that utilizes ethnographic field methods to probe the nature of Navajo aesthetics *from the native point of view*.<sup>1</sup> A pilot study designed to test the efficacy of such ethnoaesthetic research is described, and directions for future study suggested by the preliminary investigation are outlined. With interviews and field observations just completed in August 1988, the discussion here can only be suggestive, with more conclusive results awaiting further data analysis. Nevertheless, I suggest that by examining the internal, culturally empowered processes of designing, executing and evaluating handwoven products, a greater understanding of Navajo aesthetics may be gained.

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<sup>1</sup>In another paper (Hedlund 1989), the methods used by several analysts to gather, record and assess information concerning Navajo aesthetic values and strategies by which anthropologists might understand, within the cultural framework of contemporary Navajo society, the ways in which weavers view their textile tradition are more fully discussed. Portions of both that paper and the present one were included in presentations at the First Annual Symposium of the Textile Society of America in Minneapolis and at the 1988 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Phoenix; because of space limitations and the nature of the subject matter, the original papers have been revised and recombined into two complementary essays as now published.



## BACKGROUND RESEARCH

My investigations on contemporary Navajo weaving during the past decade (Hedlund 1983, 1987, 1988) have been based on ethnographic fieldwork, principally conducted through participant-observation. The goal of such research, focused at a cultural level of analysis, has been the establishment of an empirical characterization of craft production, moving away from the romanticized, stereotyped images created by some traders, collectors and museums, toward a documentation of *particulars* that then lead to an understanding of attitudes, motivations and broader perspectives on craft production.

The results of such study suggest that women today weave for a number of categorizable reasons, not just one; they are generally pragmatic in their approach to the craft rather than driven by purely ideological concerns; and they balance to varying degrees the material and economic concerns with the ideational and expressive dimensions of their weaving. This is to say that there is a lot of variability in weaving practices and attitudes. Summarizing this earlier work, it can be stated that most weavers respond readily to a commercial market, yet they maintain a sense of pleasure and personal purpose in weaving (ibid. 1983).

But what points of reference does a weaver actually use in designing or executing a handwoven rug today? How do weavers look at and evaluate their own rugs and those by others? Perhaps most importantly, what does Navajo weaving signify to native weavers? Previous work has not shed light on such issues in a verifiable manner. One way to explore these questions, from the weavers' own perspectives, is through systematic ethnographic inquiry.

## METHODOLOGY

During the summer of 1988, a pilot project was designed to probe the nature of Navajo ethnoaesthetics. The thrust of the project was to invite weavers to respond to a series of photographs of Navajo textiles from many periods and regions of the reservation. Both an open-ended interview and a structured set of questions were used with each weaver.

The methodology presented here combines several older models of ethnoaesthetic investigation with more recent ethnographic and ethnoscientific methods. Haeberlin, Teit and Roberts (1928), in their study of Columbian River basketmakers used pictures of baskets to prompt native informants' responses. Directed by Franz Boas, they shared the goal of "investigating the subjective attitude of the weaver, of determining individual reactions to craft aspects" (O'Neale 1932:5). In similar fashion, Lila O'Neale (1932) showed forty-seven Yurok-Karok basketmakers a series of black-and-white photographs of baskets in order to elicit information about their attitudes and practices regarding weaving. Matilda Coxé Stevenson (1904), Ruth Bunzel (1972) and Margaret Hardin (1983, 1989) all conducted research among Zuni Pueblo potters, using line drawings and other pictorial images of vessels from the Smithsonian's Zuni collection as "a frame of reference for asking questions and assessing change" (Hardin 1989). As well, others (cf. Niessen in this volume; Washburn 1990) have used similar research methods for material culture studies in other parts of the world.

In the Navajo pilot study, the application of current ethnographic methodology is reflected in the use of triad sorts and projective testing, rather than ranking tests or open-ended interviewing alone. Such instruments are an attempt to increase reliability and to allow for critical comparisons (cf. Werner and Schoepfle 1987:93-94).

Eight Navajo weavers, women ranging in age from approximately forty to sixty-five, were selected for the study from various parts of the Reservation including Crystal, Ganado, Pinon, Indian Wells, Wide Ruins and Burntwater. Through earlier field investigations, each woman was known to be an active and skilled weaver, producing rugs of relatively high quality for sale to traders, galleries and private clients. Each woman regularly derives significant income



from her weaving. In addition, two non-Navajo weavers, one Anglo-American and one Hispanic-American, were included in the study for comparative purposes; responses by these latter two are not addressed in this paper.

A total of seventy 'flash cards' depicting Navajo blankets and rugs, in various predetermined groupings, were shown to each weaver. Textiles from all areas of the reservation and from a wide range of time periods were represented. The pictures were in full color, all approximately the same size and mounted on white 5 x 7 inch cards. Except for a reference number, no notations were made on them.

Specific questions were formulated in order to structure the discussion surrounding predetermined sets of cards, usually in groups of threes. The traditional question posed in triad testing is "... which single item is most different from the remaining two, or which two items among the three are maximally similar?" (Werner and Schoepfle 1987:262). For this study, this basic question was posed for ten triadic sets, translating to: which two rugs are the same and which one differs from the others? A second question, for four triadic sets, was suggested by Margaret Hardin (personal communication, 1988) from her experience working with Zuni potters: which one of the three is the most Navajo-looking? The third question, for four different triadic sets, was the latter's converse: which is the least Navajo-looking? A fourth question, also for four different triadic sets: which is the most or least difficult to weave, was prompted by a specific interest in documenting weavers' approaches to challenging designs and techniques. The last question represents an attempt at modified projective testing by asking the weavers, for four single images presented individually, to imagine what type of person might have made the rug, and suggesting such parameters as age, family life, housing, relative wealth, and so forth. In addition, there were forty-five other cards, not associated with structured questions, that the weavers were invited to browse through as their interests dictated.

A clear explanation of the purposes of the project and a description of test procedures were presented in standard fashion to each weaver. The cards were shown to each weaver in a uniform way. Each interview was tape-recorded and took approximately three hours. The majority of interviews were conducted in Navajo, with a translator (usually someone from the weaver's family) present, although the principal investigator has a minimal understanding of the Navajo language and could therefore follow the basic trend of each interview as it progressed and could interject or respond if misunderstandings or questions arose. The weavers and translators were paid for their time with grant funds.

## RESPONSES

**Which two are the most the same?** When weavers were asked to make comparisons between rug designs it became possible to learn more about the ways in which they see--where their eyes were directed and what critical elements they perceived. Different parts of designs had different import for individuals--for some the border was a dominant concern, for others it was the corner and filler motifs, for others the center. With further analysis, this, in turn, may reflect upon how weavers conceptualize their own rug designs.

Color distinctions, or lack of them, were highlighted by asking for comparisons. Color choices appear to be a matter of individual choice, although certain regional proclivities may also be operating. Importantly, color was rarely the distinguishing factor in grouping rugs together (although it often is for museum-style categorizing) - for instance, in a triad with two black, white, grey and brown rugs and one red, black, grey and white rug, the two natural colored rugs were consistently judged less the same than one natural colored rug and the red rug, apparently because of similarities in the placement and degree of elaboration of motifs. Furthermore, pragmatics--availability, stylistic habit, and popularity with buyers--appear to have



greater bearing on color selection than any internal color symbolism (cf. Witherspoon 1977:162-163).

Specific trends in how weavers discern patterns have not yet been analyzed from the data. Until the responses are tabulated, the most interesting generalization yet to come out of this part of the interviews concerns the weavers' tendency to digress almost immediately to technical features and discussions of technology. No matter how much an interest in design and motifs was emphasized, weavers talked about how specific shapes or forms were made, where colors came from, and what one had to do to replicate those patterns.

**Where do your weaving designs come from?** When talking about designing a rug, most Navajo weavers talk about the patterns "just appearing" in their minds. They see the pattern *in toto* and know how it will come out on the loom. This was repeated frequently and is clearly operative for these women. Yet, weaving is not simply a mystical experience, but one that demands hard work and skill. Weavers frequently recounted how their hands hurt, their backs ache, their eyes sting, as they weave.

Some weavers actually make drawings of their designs on paper first--something that some writers have said did not happen. In fact, it appears that there may be a number of weavers who allow someone else in the family to draw out designs for their rugs. One young woman proudly displayed a manila file folder full of colored pencil designs on graph paper, and listed out those that her mother had already woven.

**Which is the most (or least) Navajo?** The question of Navajoness was decidedly open-ended, allowing each weaver to express what she felt this meant and then interpreting the textile cards in her own manner. For some, Navajoness was reflected in a sense of age or antiquity as when weavers selected a chief-style blanket or other nineteenth century piece as the 'most Navajo.' For others, the prominence or recognition received from the outside world signaled Navajoness in the selection of, for example, a well-known style like Two Grey Hills or Ganado Red. Only in pictorials with familiar Navajo items or figures and in functional native garments such as the traditional dress (*biil*) was there agreement on 'Navajo' elements--these were uniformly judged to be very Navajo.<sup>1</sup>

Some weavers showed greater recognition of weaving history than others. Interestingly, specialized knowledge of early woven styles typically came, not from traditional oral history sources, but from the standard ethnographic literature and from interpretive displays and programs at area museums and park monuments such as Hubbell Trading Post.

**Which is the hardest or easiest?** The weavers readily acknowledged that some designs are harder than others to produce. Some said they were challenged by difficult designs; others appeared to shy away from such difficulties. No weaver begins her work effortlessly nor does she expect good results without careful planning and execution. Often planning devices seem mysterious, or perhaps merely casual, to an onlooker, but they are not taken lightly by the pragmatic weaver--measurements, for instance, may be made with handspans, lengths of string, rulers, measuring tapes or whatever else is handy, but a good weaver will still be consistent in the measuring.

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<sup>1</sup> Triad sets for this particular question were internally limited in the types of textiles portrayed; that is, regional rug styles were grouped in one set, early blankets in another, pictorial rugs in a third. In future tests, the triads should perhaps be more mixed in their composition, and sets could be expanded to seven or more images that would be rank ordered rather than simply sorted in threes.



Weavers regularly acknowledged that, although technically complex to set up, twill weaves and other "saddle blanket weaves" were easier to do than tapestry woven designs. This is quite contrary to most traders' assertions that these so-called "double weaves" are quite difficult to execute, perhaps because the twill or two-faced structures are not fully understood.

Making mistakes is a regular concern to weavers. Contrary to certain published descriptions, rugs don't always progress perfectly and weavers *do* make mistakes, although they do not do so intentionally. The best weavers know how to correct their errors and have the determination to spend time doing it. Certain women will take several *days* to unravel an area, and then many days reweaving it in order to improve their product.

**What is this design called?** Showing pictures and asking for names is a logical way to elicit native terminology associated with woven patterns. Whenever this question was posed during conversations about specific designs, interpretive and descriptive stories were obtained, rather than consistent names for the motifs. It is clear to me, as it was to Father Berard Haile, Gladys Reichard and others, that naming designs is a highly idiosyncratic practice. Also the regular topic of inquiry were the specific motifs illustrated in Witherspoon's recent monograph (1987), said to represent *Sa'ah Naaghai* (long life) and *Bik'eh Hozho* (happiness), symbols of the Twin War Gods, Born for Water and Monster Slayer, sons of Changing Woman. No responses even remotely related to these have yet been received. Weavers who were interviewed simply do not derive the double triangle and hourglass forms from rug designs as Witherspoon suggests. While these motifs may indeed represent such beings and ideas in certain contexts, in weaving they do not appear to be associated.

**What would the weaver of this rug be like?** This has been perhaps the most interesting and provocative part of the study because it involves projecting personalities onto imaginary people, getting at roles and relationships between weavers, their families and others, and ultimately eliciting native categories of weavers from the weavers themselves.

Responses to the projective test have been fascinating. One lady said that the woman who wove a particular rug must have lived in a trailer and her husband drank too much. Another woman likened the weaver to herself, an excellent craftsperson, and then proceeded to compare her mission in life to that of a university professor who held and shared important knowledge. Women expounded on gender roles, made references to their own lives, and provided comments that revealed much about their feelings towards weaving and other weavers. Of any part of the study, this is the one that should be expanded in future work.

**Which do you prefer?** At the end of each interview, each weaver was asked whether she wanted to look at all the cards again, selecting any that were her favorites. Some showed preferences for regional styles from the area in which they live; others for rugs that they thought they could accomplish or for styles that they had heard would sell well; only a few for old things that represented passing ways. One weaver took polaroids of two cards for her own reference.

## ANALYSIS

From this pilot study coupled with ongoing contextual research, a picture of diversity and pragmatism is clearly developing. Two major generalizations may be suggested tentatively at this point: (1) Navajo weavers have a tendency to emphasize and take interest in the technical aspects of rugweaving over any formal analysis of visual designs; and (2) Navajo designs and motifs are not symbolic in the sense of having specific and unique names and meanings; they do not tell a story in and of themselves; nor do they represent specific ideas or concepts. No doubt, when the tabulation of results is complete, much more refined interpretation will be possible.



An anthropological study of ethnoaesthetics must include the culturally-linked processes of conceiving, planning, executing and evaluating woven designs. Furthermore, the context in which all this is accomplished is extremely important. The environment for learning to weave; the resources and tools that are available; jobs and other competing pastimes; marketing practices; family composition and housing and transportation; religious practices; the political and economic climate--all these affect the weaving craft on the Reservation. The current changes in lifestyles and worldviews are very much a part of the Navajo weavers' milieu. There is not sufficient space here for such wide-ranging discussion, but it should be noted that such context is extremely important to any meaningful analysis of the data acquired through structured questionnaires and formal interviews.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the present pilot data gathering barely completed, it has only been possible to suggest what conclusions might lie ahead. There are many ways in which to expand this study--some interviews, for instance, should be conducted in the winter, a traditional time for story-telling when the busyness of summer is over. There is no question that the sample size should be increased, and should cover regional areas more thoroughly, to allow for areal comparisons. Too, taking actual rugs into the interviews, to contrast with working from photographs, is an intriguing idea. Comparing the card-sort responses to the actual woven repertoire of each individual weaver will no doubt be enlightening. All this is in the future, as is the much more detailed analysis of the interviews already completed. Thus, the search for a Navajo aesthetic--the Navajo sense of style--continues.

To conclude I'd like to make two observations. First, Navajo tradition has it that two Holy People, Spider Man and Spider Woman, brought the first weaving tools and designs to the Navajo. The first loom was a thing of sacred beauty, composed of precious natural elements revered by the Navajo. Reverence for the loom and its products is carried today in *many* families. Weavers *do* make reference to the sacred elements of weaving, to the special observances and provisions that may be made before, during and after weaving. There is no question that weaving, no matter where it originally derived from, nor how much it is presently undergoing change, has an important place in the Navajo religion and the native belief system at present.

Secondly, weaving has gone through many phases and continues to evolve and change with the times. Outside influences--Pueblo tools and techniques, Spanish materials and designs, Anglo concepts and marketing--have become very important parts of the Navajo "tradition." Weavers today acknowledge the impact of traders and other consumers--this is a very active force in weaving.

Taking these two elements--the native and the imported--it is the interpretation by the Navajo women themselves that rises to the fore. The pragmatic variations in contemporary weaving practices are realities that must be incorporated into any objective assessment of the state of the art--and they make any interpretation of the craft that much more rich. They indeed reflect weavers' aesthetic attitudes and illustrate certain trends that have not been previously reported. At present, the results from this pilot study suggest that Navajo weavers have a strong sense of style that they ably incorporate into their work, even as they respond to many outside influences. While many may not be able to articulate their complex concepts of style verbally, they are skilled at generating and recreating expressive visual forms from commonly held cultural principles that have evolved through three centuries of weaving. The importance of Navajo weaving to the women included in this study lies much deeper than isolated motifs that might symbolize specific, codified ideas--it is an entire way of seeing and performing--indeed, it is an entire way of life.

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